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Class Differences in Family Stability

By August B. Hollingshead

SOCIOLOGISTS in recent years have become aware of the interdependence that exists between the family and status systems in American society, but no studies have been focused on the analysis of the problem of class differences in family stability. Consequently there is no comprehensive body of either quantitative or qualitative data that we may draw upon for a statement of similarities and differences in family stability and instability in the several classes found in our society. Official city, county, state, and national statistics on marriage and divorce do not recognize the existence of social classes, so these data are not appropriate for our purposes. In view of these limitations, this paper will merely outline some of the major differences in family stability revealed by studies of social stratification at the community level.[1] However, before we turn to a discussion of the problem of family stability and the status structure, a few paragraphs of theoretical orientation are in order.

Relation of Family and Class Systems

The nexus between the family and class systems arises from the fact that every individual is simultaneously a member of both systems. He is created in the family and placed in the class system whether he wills it or not. However, the functions of the two systems are essentially different; the family is the procreative and primary training institution, whereas the class system functions as a ranking device. The two systems are interwoven at many points in ways that are too intricate for us to unravel here. It is sufficient for present purposes to point out that each individual's original position in the class system is ascribed to him on the basis of a combination of social and biological characteristics inherited from his family through genetic and social processes. This position may be modified, and in some cases changed sharply, during the course of the individual's life; but the point of origin in the status system for every individual is the family into which he is born.

The nuclear group of husband, wife, and dependent children constitutes the primary family and common household unit throughout our society. This group normally passes through a family cycle [2] which begins with marriage and extends through the childbearing and child-rearing years and on into the old age of the parental pair. It is the maintenance of the family cycle from marriage to old age that we will take as our criterion of a stable family. Each marriage of a man and a woman brings into being a new family cycle. Upon the birth of their first child the nuclear pair becomes a family of procreation, but for

[1] W. Lloyd Warner and P. S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), pp. 60–61, 92–104; James West, *Plainville, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), pp. 57–69, 115–41; Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 59–136; August B. Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1949), pp. 66–126, 335–88, 414–36; August B. Hollingshead, "Class and Kinship in a Middle Western Community," *American Sociological Review,* Vol. 14 (Aug. 1949), pp. 469–75.

[2] For a discussion of this concept see Paul C. Glick, "The Family Cycle," *American Sociological Review,* Vol. 12 (April 1947), pp. 164–74.

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the child this family of origin is his family of orientation. Thus, each individual who marries and rears children has a family of orientation and a family of procreation. He also has an ascribed status which he inherits from his family of orientation, and an achieved status which he acquires in the course of his life. His achieved status may be different from his ascribed status, but not necessarily, particularly from the viewpoint of class position; but his family of procreation, of necessity, is different from his family of orientation. In the case of a man, his achieved status normally becomes the status of his wife and of his children during their early years.

Each nuclear family is related to a number of other nuclear families by consanguineal and affinal ties. Also, each family in the kin group occupies a position in the status system. All nuclear families in a kin group may be in the same class or may be in different class positions from others. The latter situation is produced by mobility on the part of some individual families, while other families remain in the approximate status position ascribed to them by their family of orientation. This movement of the individual nuclear family in the status system, while it is approved, and often lauded as "the American way," has important effects on kin group relations.[3]

With these considerations in mind, we turn to the discussion of class and family stability. We wish to warn the reader, however, that the statements presented in the following analysis are based on a few community studies in different parts of the Nation, and therefore the bases of the generalizations are fragmentary; heuristic observations are made in the hope that they will draw attention to this area of the social structure, and that they will give readers new insight into these facets of our society.

[3] The effects of a nuclear family's mobility, both upward and downward, on its relations to the kin group will be explored in a forthcoming paper by the author, published elsewhere.

THE UPPER CLASS

Families in the upper class may be divided into two categories on the basis of the length of time they have occupied upper-class position: (1) *established* families, which have been in the upper class for two or more generations; and (2) *new* families, which have achieved their position through the success of the present adult generation.

Who one's ancestors were, and who one's relatives are, count for more in the established family group than what one has achieved in one's own lifetime. "Background" is stressed most heavily when it comes to the crucial question of whom a member may or may not marry, for marriage is the institution that determines membership in the family group. Indeed, one of the perennial problems of the established family is the control of the marriage choices of its young men. Young women can be controlled more easily than young men, because of the sheltered life they lead and their passive role in courtship. The passivity of the upper-class female, coupled with sex exploitation of females from lower social positions by upper-class males that sometimes leads to marriage, results in a considerable number of old maids in established upper-class families. Strong emphasis on family background is accompanied by the selection of marriage mates from within the old-family group in an exceptionally high percentage of cases, and if not from the old-family group, then from the new-family segment of the upper class. The degree of kinship solidarity, combined with intraclass marriages, found in this level results in a

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high order of stability in the upper class, in the extended kin group, and in the nuclear family within it.

The established upper-class family is basically an extended kin group, solidified by lineage and a heritage of common experience in a communal setting. A complicated network of consanguineal and affinal ties unites nuclear families of orientation and procreation into an in-group that rallies when its position is threatened by the behavior of one of its members, particularly where out-marriage is involved; this principle will be illustrated below. Each nuclear family usually maintains a separate household, but it does not conceive of itself as a unit apart from the larger kin group. The nuclear family is viewed as only a part of a broader kin group that includes the consanguineal descendants of a known ancestral pair, plus kin that have been brought into the group by marriage.

An important factor in the extended established family's ability to maintain its position through several generations is its economic security. Usually a number of different nuclear families within a kin group are supported, in part at least, by income from a family estate held in trust. Also, because of the practice of intramarriage it is not unusual for a family to be the beneficiary of two or more estates held in trust. For example, in an eastern community of some 80,000 population, one of these extended family groups is the beneficiary of a trust established a century ago that yields something over $300,000 annually, after taxes. This income is divided among 37 different nuclear families descended from the founder, 28 of whom live in the community; 23 of these families are beneficiaries of one other trust fund, and 14 receive income from two or more other trust funds. These different nuclear families regard themselves as parts of the Scott[4] family; moreover, they are so regarded by other upper-class families, as well as by persons lower in the status system who know something of the details of the family history.

The Scott family has maintained its upper-class position locally for more than two centuries by a combination of property ownership, educational, legal, and political leadership, and control of marriages generation after generation. Its members are proud that it has never had a non-Protestant marriage in seven generations; only five divorces have been traced, but these are not mentioned; one desertion has been hinted, but not confirmed.

The in-group marriage test

The tradition relative to Protestant intra-upper-class marriages had a severe test in recent years. A son in one family, who had spent four years in the armed services in the late war, asked a middle-class Catholic girl to marry him. The engagement was announced by the girl's family, to the consternation of the Scotts. The Scotts immediately brought pressure on the boy to "break off the affair." His mother "bristled" at the very idea of her son's marriage; his father "had a talk with him"; his 84-year-old paternal grandmother snorted, "A Scott marry a Flaherty, never!" A great-aunt remarked icily, "No Scott is dissolute enough to *have* to marry a Flaherty." After the first shock of indignation had passed, the young man was told he was welcome in "any Scott home" without that "Flaherty flip." A few weeks later his maternal grandfather told him he would be disinherited if he "demeaned" himself by marrying "that girl."

After several months of family and class pressure against the marriage, the

[4] All names are pseudonyms; they are used because some of the quotations have meaning only in terms of them.

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young man "saw his error" and broke the engagement. A year later he married a family-approved "nice" girl from one of the other "old" families in the city. Today he is assistant cashier in his wife's family's bank, and his father is building him a fine suburban home.

Nancy Flaherty, when the storm broke over her engagement, quit her job as a secretary in an insurance office. A few weeks later she left home to seek a job in another city. After the engagement was broken she quit this job and went to New York City. Today she is unmarried, living alone, and working in New York.

This case illustrates a number of characteristics typical of the established upper-class family. It is stable, extended, tends to pull together when its position is threatened—in this instance by an out-marriage—exerts powerful controls on its members to ensure that their behavior conforms to family and class codes, and provides for its members economically by trust funds and appropriate positions.

The new family

The new upper-class family is characterized most decisively by phenomenal economic success during a short interval of time. Its meteoric rise in the economic system is normally the personal triumph of the money-maker. While its head is busy making a "million bucks," the family acquires the purchasable symbols associated with the wealthy American family: a large house, fine furniture, big automobiles, and expensive clothes. The new tycoon knows the power of money in the market place, and he often attempts to buy a high position in the status system. The new family is able to meet *the means test,* but not *the lineage test* of the established families. Consequently, it is generally systematically excluded from membership in the most prestigeful cliques and associations in the community. This is resented, especially by the wife and children; less often by the tycoon.

The new family is very unstable in comparison with the established family. It lacks the security of accepted position at the top of the local status system—a position that will come only through time; it cannot be purchased. The stabilizing influence exerted on the deviant individual by an extended family group, as well as friends, is absent. (Many upwardly mobile families break with their kin group as part of the price they pay for their mobility.) Then, too, the new family is composed of adults who are self-directing, full of initiative, believe in the freedom of the individual, and rely upon themselves rather than upon a kin group. The result is, speaking broadly, conspicuous expenditure, fast living, insecurity, and family instability. Thus, we find divorces, broken homes, alcoholism, and other symptoms of disorganization in a large number of new families. Because new families are so conspicuous in their consumption and behavior they become, in the judgment of the general population, symbolic of upper-class actions and values, much to the detriment, and resentment, of established families.

THE MIDDLE CLASSES

The nuclear upper-middle-class family, composed of husband, wife, and two or three dependent children during the major years of the family cycle, is a very stable unit in comparison with the new upper-class family and the working-class family. Divorce is rare, desertion by the husband or wife is most infrequent, and premature death rates are low.

During the past half-century changes that have taken place in American society have created a demand for technically trained personnel in such large numbers that the old middle class could

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not provide enough recruits to fill the new positions. Concomitantly, our educational institutions expanded enormously to meet the need for professionally, scientifically, and administratively trained personnel. A vast area of opportunity opened for boys and girls in the lower-middle and working classes to move upward in the economic and status structures. Thus, the majority of upper-middle-class persons now above thirty-five years of age are upward mobile. Their mobility has been made possible by education, self-discipline, and opportunity in the professional and administrative channels of our economic system.

Geographic mobility has been a second concomitant in this process. The man—or woman—who is now in the upper-middle class more often than not left his home community as a young adult to attend college. After his formal schooling was completed he generally took a job in a different community from the one where he was trained, and oftentimes it was in a different one from his home town. If he began his adult work career with a national business firm, the chances are high that he was transferred from one city to another as he moved up the job ladder.

Geographic movement is typical of an upward mobile family, even when it lives out the family cycle in its home community. In a large number of cases, when a mobile couple is newly married, both partners work. The couple often lives in an apartment or flat in a residential area that is not desirable as a permanent residence. As the husband achieves a higher economic status, the new family generally moves to a small single-family house, or a two-family one, farther from the center of the city, where there are yards and trees. Often about this time the wife quits work and the first of two or three children is born. A third or fourth move, some years later, into a six- to eight-room single-family house on a well landscaped lot in the better residential areas of the city or the suburbs normally completes the family's odyssey. While it is moving from house to house, many of its social contacts change as the husband passes through the successive stages of his business or professional career.

Even though there is a high prevalence of social and geographic mobility, and no extended kin group to bring pressure on the family, there is a negligible amount of instability. Self-discipline, the demands of the job, and the moral pressures exerted by friends and associates keep the nuclear family together. The principal family goals are success in business or a profession, a good college or university education for the children, and economic security for the parents in their old age. These goals are realized in the vast majority of cases, and the family is generally a happy, well-knit group.

The lower-middle class

The lower-middle-class family, like the upper middle, is a stable unit for the most part. In fact, there is no essential difference between these two levels of the status system in so far as family stability is concerned. In Elmtown 85 per cent of the upper-middle (class II) and 82 per cent of the lower-middle families (class III) were intact after fifteen and more years of marriage.[5] Oren found in an industrial city in Connecticut that 93 per cent of the lower-middle families with adolescent children were unbroken after eighteen and more years of marriage.[6]

Probably a higher proportion of lower-middle-class individuals have achieved

[5] Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth, op. cit.* note 1 *supra,* p. 99.

[6] Paul Oren, "Becoming a Milltown American," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1950.

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their positions through their own efforts than is true of any other status level except the new family group in the upper class. The majority of lower-middle-class adults have come from a working-class background; many have an ethnic background of recent immigrant origin. Through ability, hard work, and an element of luck they have founded small businesses, operated by the family members and a few employees, or acquired some technical training which has enabled them to obtain clerical, sales, and minor administrative posts in industry and government.

The major problems of the lower-middle-class family are connected with the security of its economic position and the education of its children. Parents generally have high educational aspirations for their children, but income limitations often compel them to compromise with less education than they desire, and possibly a different kind from what they would choose. Parents acutely see the need for a good formal education, and they make heavy sacrifices to give their children the educational training that will enable them to take over positions held by persons in the upper-middle class. By stressing education for the child, parents many times unwittingly create conflicts for themselves and their children, because the educational goals they set for the child train him in values that lead him away from his family. This process, while it does not have a direct bearing on the stability of the nuclear family, acts as a divisive factor that splits parents and children apart, as well as brothers and sisters who have received different amounts of education and follow different job channels.

THE WORKING CLASS

The family cycle is broken prematurely in the working class about twice as frequently as it is in the middle classes. Community studies indicate that from one-fourth to one-third of working-class families are broken by divorce, desertion, and death of a marital partner, after a family of procreation has been started but before it is reared. This generalization does not include families broken before the birth of children or after they leave the parental home. In Elmtown I found that 33 per cent of the working-class families (class IV) had been broken after fifteen and more years of marriage; [7] Oren [8] reported that 29 per cent of his working-class families with adolescent children were broken ones. The norm and the ideal in the working class are a stable family, but broken homes occur with such frequency that most parents realize that they are, along with unemployment, a constant hazard.

Family instability is a product of the conditions under which most working-class families live. In the first place, they are completely dependent on the swings of the business cycle in our wage-price-profits system, for the working-class family is almost invariably supported by wages earned by the hour, the piece, the day, or the week. Ideally its wages are earned by the male head, but in a considerable proportion of families the wife too is employed as a wage earner outside the home. When a working-class wife takes a job it is for a substantial reason, usually necessity, rather than the desire for "a career." [9]

Factors of stress

The home is the center of family life, and the hope of most working-class families is a single-family dwelling with a yard; but from a fifth to one-half are

[7] Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth, op. cit.* note 1 *supra,* p. 106.

[8] *Op. cit.* note 6 *supra.*

[9] See Floyd Dotson, "The Associations of Urban Workers," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1950, for an excellent analysis of urban working-class culture.

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forced to live in multiple dwelling units with inadequate space for family living. Added to this is the working-class *mos* that one is obligated to give shelter and care in a crisis to a husband's or wife's relatives or to a married child. Thus, in a considerable perecentage of these families the home is shared with some relative. Then, too, resources are stringently limited, so when a family is faced with unemployment, illness, and death it must turn to someone for help. In such crises, a relative is called upon in most instances before some public agency. The relative normally has little to offer, but in most cases that little is shared with the family in need, even though grudgingly.

While crises draw family members together, they also act as divisive agents; for when a family has to share its limited living space and meager income with relatives, kin ties are soon strained, often to the breaking point. One family is not able to give aid to another on an extensive scale without impairing its own standard of living; possibly its own security may be jeopardized. In view of this risk, some persons do everything short of absolute refusal to aid a relative in distress; some even violate the "blood is thicker than water" *mos* and refuse to give help when it is requested. This ordinarily results in the permanent destruction of kin ties, but it is justified by the belief that one's own family's needs come first.

Although the principle is stressed here that the working-class family lives very close to the limits of its economic resources at all times, and when a crisis comes its effects upon family stability are profound, we should not overlook the fact that moral, personal, and emotional factors contribute to family instability. It is possible that these factors are as important as the economic ones, but this and other observations made here need to be verified by field studies. Actually, while we know that the family at this level of the status structure is susceptible to instability, we have little knowledge derived from systematic research to tell us what cultural conditions are associated with unstable, in contrast to stable, families. A carefully planned series of studies of stable and unstable families with class level held constant is needed. Until this is done, we can only guess about the factors which condition stability and instability in family life.

THE LOWER CLASS

Lower-class families exhibit the highest prevalence of instability of any class in the status structure. If we view the lower-class family in terms of a continuum, we find at one end stable families throughout the family cycle; at the other end, the nuclear family of a legally wedded husband and wife and dependent children has given way to a reciprocal companionate relationship between a man and a woman. This latter relationship, in most cases, is the result of their personal desire to live together; it is not legally sanctioned. A companionate family is often a complicated one. It may include the natural children of the couple, plus the woman's children from a previous legal or companionate relationship; also there may be dependent children of the man living with the woman. Normally, when the lower-class family is broken, as in the higher classes, the mother keeps the children. However, the mother may desert her "man" for another man, and leave her children with him, her mother or sister, or a social agency. In the Deep South and Elmtown, from 50 to 60 per cent of lower-class family groups are broken once, and often more, by desertion, divorce, death, or separation, often due to imprisonment of the man, between marriage, legal or companionate, and its normal dissolution through

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the marriage of adult children and the death of aged parents.[10]

Economic insecurity is but one of a number of factors that give rise to this amount of instability. Lower-class people are employed in the most menial, the poorest-paid, and the dirtiest jobs; these jobs also tend to be seasonal and cyclical, and of short duration. Moreover, from one-half to two-thirds of the wives are gainfully employed outside the home; in many cases they are the sole support of the family. However, the problem of economic insecurity does not account for amoral behavior that ranges from the flagrant violation of conventional sex mores to open rebellion against formal agencies of social control.

The very nature of our society may be responsible, in large part, for the number, the intensity, and the variety of social problems associated with the lower class. Such cultural values as individualism, wealth, position, and power must be considered in an analysis of social problems from the viewpoint of the class system. Ours is a competitive, aquisitive society where individuals successful in the competitive arena are admired by most other Americans; they achieve positions of prestige and of power desired by many and attained by few. Less successful individuals may struggle as hard but not be able to do more than hold the status in which they were born; their goal may be to avoid the sorry drift toward lower-class existence. Other individuals may fail in the struggle and sink to the bottom. To be sure, some were born there and failed to rise from the unenviable position they inherited at birth.

[10] Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South, op. cit.* note 1 *supra,* pp. 118–36; Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth, op. cit.* note 1 *supra,* pp. 116–20.

RESEARCH NEEDED

The interdependence between the family and status systems sketched here needs to be studied systematically before we can draw definitive generalizations that may be used as the basis for an action program to increase family stability. Isolated community studies indicate that there are functional linkages between the types as well as the amounts of family instability at different levels of the status structure. These indications ought to be analyzed by carefully designed research. If and when this is done, I believe we shall gain some valuable new insights into family and individual stability and instability.

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